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DISCOURSE, &c.

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A

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ON THE

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BY THE

PRESIDENT.

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A

DISCOURSE, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

IT is not eaſy to ſpeak with propriety to ſo many ſtudents of different ages and different degrees of advancement. The mind requires nouriſhment adapted to its growth; and what may have promoted our earlier efforts, might retard us in our nearer approaches to perfection.

The firſt endeavours of a young Painter, as I have remarked in a former diſcourſe, muſt be employed in the attainment of mechanical dexterity, and confined to the mere imitation of the object before him. Thoſe who have advanced beyond the rudiments, may, perhaps, find ad-

vantage in reflecting on the advice which I have likewiſe given them, when I recommended the diligent ſtudy of the works of our great predeceſſors; but I at the ſame time endeavoured to guard them againſt an implicit ſubmiſſion to the authority of any one maſter however excellent; or by a ſtrict imitation of his manner. I will now add that nature herſelf is not to be too cloſely copied. There are excellencies in the Art of Painting beyond what is commonly called the imitation of nature: and theſe excellencies I wiſh to point out. The ſtudents who, having paſſed through the initiatory exerciſes, are more advanced in the art, and who, ſure of their hand, have leiſure to exert their underſtanding, muſt now be told, that a mere copier of nature can never produce any thing great, can never raiſe and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the ſpectator.

The wiſh of the genuine Painter muſt be more extenſive: inſtead of endeavouring to amuſe mankind with the minute neatneſs of his imitations, he muſt endeavour to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas; inſtead of ſeeking praiſe, by deceiving the ſuperficial ſenſe of the ſpectator, he muſt ſtrive for fame, by captivating the imagination.

The principle now laid down, that the perfection of this Art does not conſiſt in mere imitation, is far from being new or ſingular. It is, indeed, ſupported by the general opinion of the enlightened part of mankind. The Poets, Orators, and Rhetoricians of antiquity, are continually enforcing this poſition, that all the arts receive their perfection from an ideal beauty, ſuperior to what is to be found in individual nature. They are ever referring to the practice of the Painters and Sculptors of their times, particularly Phidias (the favourite Artiſt of Antiquity) to illuſtrate their aſſertions. As if they could not ſufficiently expreſs their admiration of his genius by what they knew, they have recourſe to poetical enthuſiaſm. They call it Inſpiration, a Gift from Heaven; the artiſt is ſuppoſed to have aſcended the celeſtial regions, to furniſh his mind with this perfect Idea of beauty. "He," ſays Proclus*, "who takes for his model ſuch forms as nature produces, "and confines himſelf to an exact imitation of them, will "never attain to what is perfectly beautiful. For the "works of nature are full of diſproportion, and fall very "ſhort of the true ſtandard of beauty. So that Phidias, "when he formed his Jupiter, did not copy any object ever

* Lib. 2, in Timæum Platonis, as cited by Junius de Pictura veterum.

"preſented

" preſented to his ſight; but contemplated only that " image which he had conceived in his mind from " Homer's deſcription." And thus Cicero, ſpeaking of the ſame Phidias; " Neither did this artiſt," ſays he, " when he " carved the image of Jupiter or Minerva, ſet before him " any one human figure, as a pattern, which he was to " copy; but having a more perfect Idea of beauty fixed in " his mind, this he ſteadily contemplated, and to the " imitation of this all his ſkill and labour were directed."

The Moderns are not leſs convinced than the Ancients of this ſuperior power exiſting in the Art; nor leſs conſcious of its effects. Every language has adopted terms expreſſive of this excellence; the *Guſto grande* of the Italians; the *Beau ideal* of the French; and the *great ſtyle*, *genius*, and *taſte* among the Engliſh, are but different appellations of the ſame thing. It is this intellectual dignity, they ſay, that enobles the Painter's art, that lays the line between him and the mere mechanic, and produces thoſe great effects in an inſtant, which eloquence and poetry, by ſlow and repeated efforts, are ſcarcely able to attain.

Such is the warmth with which both the Antients and Moderns ſpeak of this divine art; but, as I have formerly obſerved,

obſerved, enthuſiaſtic admiration ſeldom promotes knowledge. Though a Student by ſuch praiſe may have his attention rouſed, and a deſire excited, of running in this great career; yet it is poſſible that what has been ſaid to excite, may only ſerve to deter him. He examines his own mind, and perceives there nothing of that divine inſpiration, with which, he is told, ſo many others have been favoured. He never travelled to Heaven to gather new ideas; and he finds himſelf poſſeſſed of no other qualifications than what mere common ſenſe and a plain underſtanding can confer. Thus he becomes gloomy amidſt the ſplendor of figurative declamation, and thinks it hopeleſs, to purſue an object which he ſuppoſes out of the reach of human induſtry.

But on this, as upon many other occaſions, we ought to diſtinguiſh how much is to be given to enthuſiaſm, and how much to reaſon. We ought to allow for, and we ought to commend, that ſtrength of vivid expreſſion, which is neceſſary to convey, in its full force, the higheſt ſenſe of the moſt complete effect of art; taking care at the ſame time, not to loſe in terms of vague admiration, that ſolidity and truth of principle, upon which alone we can reaſon, and may be enabled to practice.

It is not eaſy to define in what this great ſtyle conſiſts; nor to deſcribe, by words, the proper means of acquiring it, if the mind of the Student ſhould be at all capable of ſuch an acquiſition. Could we teach taſte or genius by rules, they would be no longer taſte and genius. But though there neither are, nor can be, any preciſe invariable rules for the exerciſe, or the acquiſition, of theſe great qualities; yet we may as truly ſay that they always operate in proportion to our attention in obſerving the works of nature, to our ſkill in ſelecting, and to our care in digeſting, methodizing, and comparing our obſervations. There are many beauties in our art, that ſeem at firſt, to lie without the reach of precept, and yet may eaſily be reduced to practical principles. Experience is all in all; but it is not every one who profits by experience; and moſt people err, not ſo much from want of capacity to find their object, as from not knowing what object to purſue. This great ideal perfection and beauty are not to be ſought in the heavens, but upon the earth. They are about us, and upon every ſide of us. But the power of diſcovering what is deformed in nature, or in other words, what is particular and uncommon, can be acquired only by experience; and the whole beauty and grandeur of the art conſiſts, in my opinion, in being able

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to get above all ſingular forms, local cuſtoms, particularities, and details of every kind.

All the objects which are exhibited to our view by nature, upon cloſe examination will be found to have their blemiſhes and defects. The moſt beautiful forms have ſomething about them like weakneſs, minuteneſs, or imperfection. But it is not every eye that perceives theſe blemiſhes; it muſt be an eye long uſed to the contemplation and compariſon of theſe forms; and which, by a long habit of obſerving what any ſet of objects of the ſame kind have in common, has acquired the power of diſcerning what each wants in particular. This long laborious compariſon ſhould be the firſt ſtudy of the painter, who aims at the greateſt ſtyle. By this means, he acquires a juſt Idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by herſelf, her imperfect ſtate by her more perfect. His eye being enabled to diſtinguiſh the accidental deficiencies, excreſcences and deformities of things from their general figures, he makes out an abſtract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original; and what may ſeem a paradox, he learns to deſign naturally by drawing his figures unlike to any one object. This idea of the perfect ſtate of nature, which the artiſt calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle, by which works of genius

are

are conducted. By this Phidias acquired his fame. He wrought upon a ſober principle, what has ſo much excited the enthuſiaſm of the world; and by this method you, who have courage to tread the fame path, may acquire equal reputation.

This is the idea which has acquired, and which ſeems to have a right to the epithet of *Divine*; as it may be ſaid to preſide, like a ſupreme judge, over all the productions of nature; appearing to be poſſeſſed of the will and intention of the Creator, as far as they regard the external form of living beings.

When a man once poſſeſſes this idea in its perfection, there is no danger, but that he will be ſufficiently warmed by it himſelf, and be able to warm and raviſh every one elſe.

Thus it is from a reiterated experience, and a cloſe compariſon of the objects in nature, that an artiſt becomes poſſeſſed of the idea of that central form, if I may ſo expreſs it, from which every deviation is deformity. But the inveſtigation of this form I grant is painful, and I know but of one method of ſhortening the road; this is, by a careful ſtudy of the works of the antient ſculptors; who, being

indefatigable

indefatigable in the ſchool of nature, have left models of that perfect form behind them, which an artiſt would prefer as ſupremely beautiful, who had ſpent his whole life in that ſingle contemplation. But if induſtry carried them thus far, may not you alſo hope for the ſame reward from the ſame labour? We have the ſame ſchool opened to us, that was opened to them; for nature denies her inſtructions to none, who deſire to become her pupils.

To the principle I have laid down, that the idea of beauty in each ſpecies of Beings is invariably one, it may be objected, that in every ſpecies there are various central forms, which are ſeparate and diſtinct from each other, and yet are undeniably beautiful; that in the human figure, for inſtance, the beauty of the Hercules is one, of the Gladiator another, of the Apollo another; which makes ſo many different ideas of beauty.

It is true, indeed, that theſe figures are each perfect in their kind, though of different characters and proportions; but ſtill neither of them is the repreſentation of an individual, but of a claſs. And as there is one general form, which, as I have ſaid, belongs to the human kind at large, ſo in each of theſe claſſes there is one common idea and central

form, which is the abſtract of the various individual forms belonging to that claſs. Thus, though the forms of childhood and age differ exceedingly; there is a common form in childhood, and a common form in age, which is the more perfect, as it is more remote from all peculiarities. But I muſt add further, that though the moſt perfect forms of each of the general diviſions of the human figure are ideal, and ſuperior to any individual form of that claſs; yet the higheſt perfection of the human figure is not to be found in any one of them; it is not in the Hercules, nor in the Gladiator, nor in the Apollo; but in that form which is compounded of them all, and which partakes equally of the activity of the Gladiator, of the delicacy of the Apollo, and of the muſcular ſtrength of the Hercules. For perfect beauty in any ſpecies muſt combine all the characters which are beautiful in that ſpecies. It cannot conſiſt in any one to the excluſion of the reſt: no one, therefore, muſt be predominant, that no one may be deficient.

The knowledge of theſe different characters, and the power of ſeparating and diſtinguiſhing them, is undoubtedly neceſſary to the painter, who is to vary his compoſitions with figures of various forms and proportions, though he

he is never to loſe ſight of the general idea of perfection in each kind.

There is, likewiſe, a kind of ſymmetry, or proportion, which may properly be ſaid to belong to deformity. A figure lean or corpulent, tall or ſhort, though deviating from beauty, may ſtill have a certain union of the various parts, which may contribute to make them on the whole, not unpleaſing.

When the Artiſt has by diligent attention acquired a clear and diſtinct idea of beauty and ſymmetry; when he has reduced the variety of nature to the abſtract idea; his next taſk will be to become acquainted with the genuine habits of nature, as diſtinguiſhed from thoſe of faſhion. For in the ſame manner, and on the ſame principles, as he has acquired the knowledge of the real forms of nature, diſtinct from accidental deformity, he muſt endeavour to ſeparate ſimple chaſte nature, from thoſe adventitious, thoſe affected and forced airs or actions, with which ſhe is loaded by modern education.

Perhaps I cannot better explain what I mean, than by reminding you of what was taught us, by the Profeſſor of Anatomy,

Anatomy, in reſpect to the natural poſition and movement of the feet. He obſerved that the faſhion of turning them outwards was contrary to the intent of nature, as might be ſeen from the ſtructure of the bones, and from the weakneſs that proceeded from that manner of ſtanding. To this we may add the erect poſition of the head, the projection of the cheſt, the walking with ſtrait knees, and many ſuch actions, which are merely the reſult of faſhion, and what nature never warranted, as we are ſure that we have been taught them when children.

I have mentioned but a few of thoſe inſtances, in which vanity or caprice have contrived to diſtort and disfigure the human form; your own recollection will add to theſe a thouſand more of ill-underſtood methods, that have been practiſed to diſguiſe nature, among our dancing-maſters, hair-dreſſers, and taylors, in their various ſchools of deformity*.

However the mechanic and ornamental arts may ſacrifice to faſhion, ſhe muſt be entirely excluded from the Art of

" * Thoſe," ſays Quintilian, " who are taken with the outward ſhew of things, " think that there is more beauty in perſons, who are trimmed, curled and " painted, than uncorrupt nature can give; as if beauty were merely the effect " of the corruption of manners."

Painting;

Painting; the painter muſt never miſtake this capricious changeling for the genuine offspring of nature; he muſt diveſt himſelf of all prejudices in favour of his age or country; he muſt diſregard all local, and temporary ornaments, and look only on thoſe general habits that are every where and always the ſame. He addreſſes his works to the people of every country and every age; he calls upon poſterity to be his ſpectators, and ſays with Zeuxis, *In æternitatem pingo.*

The neglect of ſeparating modern faſhions from the habits of nature, leads to that ridiculous ſtile which has been practiſed by ſome painters, who have given to Græcian Heroes the airs and graces practiſed in the court of Lewis the Fourteenth; an abſurdity almoſt as great as it would have been to have dreſſed them after the faſhion of that court.

To avoid this error, however, and to retain the true ſimplicity of nature, is a taſk more difficult than at firſt ſight it may appear. The prejudices in favour of the faſhions and cuſtoms that we have been uſed to, and which are juſtly called a ſecond nature, make it too often difficult to diſtinguiſh that which is natural, from that which is the

 reſult

reſult of education; they frequently even give a predilection in favour of the artificial mode; and almoſt every one is apt to be guided by thoſe local prejudices who has not chaſtiſed his mind, and regulated the inſtability of his affections, by the eternal invariable idea of nature.

Here then, as before, we muſt have recourſe to the Ancients as inſtructors. It is from a careful ſtudy of their works that you will be enabled to attain to the real ſimplicity of nature; they will ſuggeſt many obſervations, which would probably eſcape you, if your ſtudy were confined to nature alone. And, indeed, I cannot help ſuſpecting, that in this inſtance, the Ancients had an eaſier taſk than the moderns. They had, probably, little or nothing to unlearn, as their manners were nearly approaching to this deſirable ſimplicity; while the modern artiſt, before he can ſee the truth of things, is obliged to remove a veil, with which the faſhion of the times has thought proper to cover her.

Having gone thus far in our inveſtigation of the great ſtile in painting; if we now ſhould ſuppoſe that the artiſt has formed the true idea of beauty, which enables him to give his works a correct and perfect deſign; if we ſhould

ſuppoſe

ſuppoſe alſo, that he has acquired a knowledge of the unadulterated habits of nature, which gives him ſimplicity; the reſt of his taſk is, perhaps, leſs than is generally imagined. Beauty and ſimplicity have ſo great a ſhare in the compoſition of a great ſtile, that he who has acquired them has little elſe to learn. It muſt not, indeed, be forgot, that there is a nobleneſs of conception, which goes beyond anything in the mere exhibition, even of perfect form; there is an art of animating and dignifying the figures with intellectual grandeur, of impreſſing the appearance of philoſophic wiſdom, or heroick virtue. This can only be acquired by him that enlarges the ſphere of his underſtanding by a variety of knowledge, and warms his imagination with the beſt productions of antient and modern poetry.

A hand thus exerciſed, and a mind thus inſtructed, will bring the Art to an higher degree of excellence than, perhaps, it has hitherto attained in this country. Such a ſtudent will diſdain the humbler walks of painting, which, however profitable, can never aſſure him a permanent reputation. He will leave the meaner artiſt ſervilely to ſuppoſe that thoſe are the beſt pictures, which are moſt likely to deceive the ſpectator. He will permit the lower painter, like the floriſt or collector of ſhells, to exhibit the minute diſcriminations,

which

which diſtinguiſh one object of the ſame ſpecies from another; while he like the philoſopher will conſider nature in the abſtract, and repreſent in every one of his figures the character of its ſpecies.

If deceiving the eye were the only buſineſs of the Art, there is no doubt, indeed, but the minute painter would be more apt to ſucceed: but it is not the eye, it is the mind, which the painter of genius deſires to addreſs; nor will he waſte a moment upon theſe ſmaller objects, which only ſerve to catch the ſenſe, to divide the attention, and to counteract his great deſign of ſpeaking to the heart.

This is the ambition I could wiſh to excite in your minds; and the object I have had in my view, throughout this diſcourſe, is that one great idea of the Art, which gives it its true dignity, that entitles it to the name of a Liberal Art, and ranks it as a ſiſter of poetry.

It may poſſibly have happened to many young ſtudents whoſe application was ſufficient to overcome all difficulties, and whoſe minds were capable of embracing the moſt extenſive views, that they have, by a wrong direction originally given, ſpent their lives in the meaner walks of painting,

without

without ever knowing there was a nobler to purſue. Albert Durer, as Vaſari has juſtly remarked, would, probably, have been one of the firſt painters of his age (and he lived in an æra of great artiſts) had he been initiated into thoſe great principles of the Art, which were ſo well underſtood, and practiſed, by his contemporaries in Italy. But unluckily having never ſeen or heard of any other manner, he conſidered his own, without doubt, as perfect.

As for the various departments of the Art, which do not preſume to make ſuch high pretentions, they are many; none of them are without their merit, though none enter into competition with this great univerſal preſiding idea of the Art. The painters who have applied themſelves more particularly to low and vulgar characters, and who expreſs with preciſion, the various ſhades of paſſion, as they are exhibited by vulgar minds (ſuch as we ſee in the works of Hogarth) deſerve great praiſe; but as their genius has been employed on low and confined ſubjects, the praiſe that we give muſt be as limited as its object. The merry-making, or quarrelling of the Boors of Teniers; the ſame ſort of productions of Brouwer, or Oſtade, are excellent in their kind. So likewiſe are the French gallantries of Watteau; the landſcapes of Claude Lorraine; the ſea-

pieces of Vandervelde; the battles of Burgognone; and the views of Cannaletti. All theſe painters have, in general, the ſame right, in different degrees, to the name of a Painter, which a ſatiriſt, an epigrammatiſt, a ſonnetteer, a writer of paſtorals, or deſcriptive poetry, has to that of a poet.

In the ſame rank, and, perhaps, of not ſo great merit, is the cold painter of portraits; but his correct and juſt imitation of his object has its merit. Even the painter of ſtill life, whoſe higheſt ambition is to give a minute repreſentation of every part of thoſe low objects, which he ſets before him, deſerves praiſe in proportion to his attainment; becauſe no part of this excellent Art, ſo much the ornament of poliſhed life, is deſtitute of value and uſe. Theſe, however, are by no means the views to which the mind of the ſtudent ought to be *primarily* directed. By aiming at better things, if from particular inclination, or from the taſte of the time and place he lives in, or from neceſſity, or from failure in the higheſt attempts, he is obliged to deſcend lower; he will bring into the lower ſphere of art, a grandeur of compoſition and character, that will raiſe and enoble his works far above their natural rank.

A man

A man is not weak, though he may not be able to weild the club of Hercules; nor does a man always practiſe that which he eſteems the beſt; but does that which he can beſt do. In moderate attempts, there are many walks open to the artiſt. But as the idea of beauty is of neceſſity but one, ſo there can be but one great mode of painting; the leading principle of which I have endeavoured to explain.

I ſhould be ſorry, if what is here recommended, ſhould be at all underſtood to countenance a careleſs or indetermined manner of painting; for though the painter is to overlook the accidental diſcriminations of nature, he is to pronounce diſtinctly, and with preciſion, the general forms of things. A firm and determined outline is one of the characteriſtics of the great ſtyle in painting; and let me add that he who poſſeſſes the knowledge of the exact form, that every part of nature ought to have, will be fond of expreſſing that knowledge with correctneſs and preciſion in all his works.

To conclude; I have endeavoured to reduce the idea of beauty to general principles. And I had the pleaſure to obſerve that the profeſſor of painting proceeded in the ſame method, when he ſhewed you that the artifice of contraſt

was founded but on one principle. And I am convinced that this is the only means of advancing ſcience, of clearing the mind from a confuſed heap of contradictory obſervations, that do but perplex and puzzle the ſtudent, when he compares them, or miſguide him if he gives himſelf up to their authority; but bringing them under one general head, can alone give reſt and ſatisfaction to an inquiſitive mind.

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